

from:
Rev Ian Howarth
Chair of District

4th November, 2020

Dear friends,

Greetings to you in these challenging times for us all, as we seek to be faithful to our calling as God's people.

As we enter another phase of restrictions in response to the Covid19 pandemic we are having to ask ourselves again how we respond appropriately as Methodist churches. I recognise that each context is different, and I also recognise the vast amount of work many churches have done to make their buildings and their worship as Covid safe as possible.

However, we need to remember that nothing is without risk, and every church, indeed, every individual has to manage their own risk as they see fit. That includes volunteers, ministers and any other staff. No pressure should be put on anyone to put themselves at risk. Just because you can do something, does not mean that you must. The final decision for every church as to whether it opens rests with the Church Council, but if, in the light of the current risks, and as a sign of care for others, a church feels it needs to suspend worship for a while, there should be no sense of failure or guilt.

We also know that for some the risk of loneliness and isolation leading to poor mental health is real, and a properly risk assessed act of worship can contribute positively to the mental, spiritual and emotional health of those taking part, and some of our churches will feel they have the resources to offer this as a positive response to the current situation.

When worship is taking place, we do need to remember to encourage everyone to observe the guidelines for safety. These include the instruction that there is "no interaction with anyone outside your household or support bubble either inside or outside the building", especially for those over 70. So, no mingling and chatting, just worship! At the end of worship people should leave the building immediately and not interact with others, beyond perhaps a wave. Masks, of course, should always be worn in church, except for those leading worship or reading.

When travelling to and from church you cannot mix with anyone outside your 'bubble', so we are unable to give others a lift.

You can find much fuller guidance on the Methodist website: <https://www.methodist.org.uk/for-churches/property/coronavirus-guidance-for-property/> and on the Facebook page: 'Reopening UK Methodist Buildings' there is useful, well-informed discussion of the issues and it is a good place to ask questions!

Of course, the church is more than our buildings, and many have discovered alternative ways of worshipping over recent months. The District online service on Facebook and YouTube will continue weekly until Christmas, to supplement what local churches and circuits are doing. We are looking to develop a fortnightly pattern in the New Year, when we will dovetail with worship offerings from different circuits and churches.

In the meantime, I thank all who have worked so hard to maintain our church life during the restrictions, and pray that God will bless us to discover in new ways his love and his grace in Christ, as we celebrate his coming in different ways this Christmas,

May God bless you,

